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SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

AND POLICY

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SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND POLICY

1 Introduction

It goes without saying that the negative impact of many modern tourist activities on nature and the environment influences national and international policy. In addition to the negative influences of current activities, there is also the issue of how tourist activities can positively influence the economic development of traditionally agricultural regions which have experienced sharp declines in their agricultural activities in the last decades, though they are attractive rural sites, such as Tuscany, inland Spain and Central France. Bätzing (1991 and 1996) states that tourism development should be based on ecological and landscape limitations. Rural or regional development has to be used as a framework for all problems relating to nature conservation and tourism.

The concept of sustainable tourism has become the catchword in the industry in the 1990s, particularly in the Alps. It has been argued that tourism development has to take the protection of landscape and nature as a prerequisite for every type of development. However, the concept of sustainable tourism is, in itself, still undefined. Therefore, it is necessary to operationalise the concept, though in practice this goal is far from easy, as these preconditions are not clear in many concrete cases as evidenced by Laws and Swartbrook (1996), and Evans and Henry (1996).

Therefore, there is a need for operationalisation. Furthermore, attention should be paid to the broader context of sustainable tourism. Can it be seen as a special case of sustainable development, as articulated by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987)? Another relevant question is to what extent sustainable tourism as a concept can solve the environmental problems as well as the regional problems of peripheral agricultural areas? We can only answer these questions by looking at the agricultural development in Europe in more detail, since nature tourism and agricultural activities are closely connected. Additionally, we should pay attention to the supply and demand of nature in rural areas; this is necessary since tourism and agriculture compete with each other regarding the use of space. Finally, we come to the crucial question of which groups, e.g. farmers, tourists, modern industries are the losers or winners of the current competition for space in Europe.

2. Polluting sectors

Traditional neoclassical economics claims that an optimal allocation of production factors can be realised by letting the market work. Environmental problems are defined in this framework as negative external effects which disturb the optimal functioning of the otherwise well-functioning market process. The authorities should define these external effects and calculate the costs which are shifted away to non-market parties. These social costs outside the normal market process have to be paid by the polluter: the Polluter Pays Principle finds its roots in these ideas.

It became clear, in the course of time, that there are many barriers to implementing these measures as defined in the theoretical framework (Dietz and Van der Straaten, 1992). Legislative procedures were necessary to curb pollution, but even these environmental laws were not able to alter production so that environmental problems decreased in number and slope. On the contrary, Western societies were increasingly confronted with serious environmental problems. Societal groups sought for other concepts and ideas aimed at reducing these problems to an acceptable level. The World Commission on Environment and Development created the concept of sustainable development as a new paradigm for modern societies (1987). This concept has been accepted as a guiding principle for all economic activities worldwide.

3 The Tourism Sector and Sustainable Tourism

The reaction of the tourism sector was quite weak after publication of the report by the World Commission on Environment and Development. This was surely influenced by the idea that the tourist industry does not belong to the polluting production sectors, which are in that view concentrated in industrial activities such as oil refineries, heating, intensive agriculture, iron melters, etc. Tourism can be considered in that view as an environmentally friendly sector. This attitude changed rapidly; in the beginning of the 1990s, sustainable tourism became a well-accepted concept in the tourism sector.

There are several reasons why the industry adopted the concept in that period:

1. Nobody could foresee the wide acceptance of the concept of sustainable development. In fact, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) propagated the concept in its World Conservation Strategy as early as 1980. Nevertheless, it was not accepted as a general principle, so, there was no reason to expect it to become popular seven years later. However, there is a significant difference between the two concepts. The World Commission on

Environment and Development consolidated the issue of the development of Third World countries and environmental problems which made the latter concept acceptable to rich and poor countries. In particular, governments and international authorities were among the first to advocate the sustainability concept. They felt it could help to solve environmental and development problems.

The polluting sectors were in a difficult position as they became aware of potential problems from new massive attempts by the government to reduce environmental degradation and disruption. For example, the European Union called its Fifth Environmental Action Plan 'Towards Sustainability' (1992). Polluters predicted that authorities would make the environment a serious policy aim. Polluting sectors would not gain, in that situation, from a reluctant attitude towards environmental claims, but they could win with a pro-environmental attitude. By adopting the ill-defined concept of sustainable tourism, the sector could provide this gain, while, additionally, accepting the concept would not put them in a difficult position vis-a-vis the authorities due to the weakness of the concept itself.

2. Furthermore, many tourists changed their general attitude towards environmentally friendly activities. A substantial number reacted positively to the environment label, so, the demand side of the market influenced the attitude of the industry. In particular, a general concept like sustainable tourism met these goals.

3. In the environmental debate, it is impossible to prioritise all the issues. By definition, there are only a few concrete environmental problems which can penetrate people's perceptions. The result of this is that the environmental debate can be strongly influenced by any problem which attracts enough attention at a particular moment. In the beginning of the 1990s, the enhanced greenhouse effect was a priority on the agenda. The greenhouse effect is mainly caused by the emissions of carbon dioxide resulting from the burning of fossil fuels. The tourism sector is strongly dependent on planes, cars or trains as a mean of transport. All of them use fossil fuels. This put the industry in a difficult position. If the authorities called for a reduction in the use of fossil fuels as an element of sustainable development, a reduction in traffic might result. It would be good for the sector to develop the concept of sustainable tourism by excluding the use of fossil fuel as a topic in the debate. However, this could only be done if the tourism sector itself used and manipulated the concept. Therefore, it was in the industry's interest to accept the loosely defined concept and to define it to its advantage.

4. Until the 1980s, there were no problems on the demand side of the tourist market. The demand for tourist services increased every year resulting in a booming industry, particularly in mass tourism. However, certain segments of the market became saturated, especially as a result of tourists exploring the new opportunities of far and exotic destinations. Certain types of mass tourism developed in the late 60s and 70s without being aware of nature, and the environment was confronted with a new type of tourist for whom sun, sand, and sea were no longer sufficient for a holiday on the Mediterranean. In other words, many parts of the Eastern coast of Spain were confronted, for the first time in their existence, with fewer tourists.

There was no choice for the authorities in these regions. Most of them recognised the seriousness of the situation. If they continued as before, they would surely lose many customers who preferred, generally speaking, a higher level of services and a more environmentally friendly situation. The sustainable tourism concept became, in the eyes of these authorities, a solution to the problems of the sector. With the concept of sustainable tourism, the old-fashioned resorts along the Spanish coast could be saved. Upgrading the resort including the environment became, from a marketing point of view, a good option. The concept of sustainable tourism fits in these plans perfectly.

From the previous discussion, it can be concluded that the concept of sustainable tourism was increasingly accepted by the tourist industry, mainly due to certain aspects of the sector itself. Additionally, the vagueness of the concept made it a good marketing instrument. If it had not been available, it would have been developed by the tourism sector itself!

The confusion in the use of the concept grew when it became associated with the need of rural development. The concept of rural development is mainly related to the German idea of 'sanftes Tourismus', already propagated at the end of the 1970s as a mean to bring down mass tourism development particularly in the Alps (CIPRA, 1985; Krippendorf, 1986; Bätzing, 1991). In many publications, the concept of sustainable tourism is used in connection with the need for a sound rural development. Before we answer the question whether this new combination of sustainable tourism and such concepts as rural development and sustainable development make sense, we need to address the development of European rural areas in the last decades in general.

4 Rural Development in Europe

Many environmental groups claim that mass tourism in the Alps will put more pressure on fragile ecosystems in the Alps (Danz 1989; Lorch, 1995; Hasslacher, 1992). From these statements it is often generally concluded that the Alps are overloaded with tourist activities. Bätzing (1993) made it clear, however, that many parts of the Alps are, in reality, underdeveloped. Traditional agriculture is hardly possible anymore in the remote mountain valleys with a short growing season, which creates barriers against intensification of agriculture. This results in an unfavourable competitive position for mountain farmers compared with farmers from the warm fertile plains which are, indeed, nearer to the centres of consumption. From this research, it can be concluded that the Alps are, deviating from a generally accepted idea, in fact, not overrun with tourists.

After visiting the Alps, people are convinced that this region is overdeveloped, because the great majority of tourists, by definition, only visit resorts. They do not go to the remote valleys without modern motorways and comfortable hotels everywhere. These tourists believe that all parts of the Alps are similar to the section they see. In reality, the Alps are geographically polarised, meaning that overdevelopment and underdevelopment can be found in the same region.

If this is the case in such a 'well developed' area of the Alps, we might ask about the situation in other more remote parts of Europe such as Central France, inland Spain, Portugal, and the Scandinavian countries. Here the development is not only influenced by agricultural activities, but also by a strong geographical polarisation of economic activities.

The development in the agricultural sector can be sketched by a continuing intensification of agricultural practices in the fertile plains not far from the market in agricultural products, the modern conurbations. These areas can realise a lower cost price than nearly all farmers located in remote parts of Europe, particularly in hilly and mountainous areas. These farmers can only compete to a very limited degree. In most cases, they abandon their land, which is a form of extensification, or they intensify on those segments of their soils which are relatively fertile and flat. This process leads to many environmental problems such as the high use of fertilizers, resulting in water pollution, and pesticides. The intensification process and in particular, abandoning the land causes other serious environmental problems such as erosion and a decrease in the surface of grassland with a high ecological value.

The European Union, fully aware of the social aspect of these problems, constructed numerous instruments aimed at redeveloping the countryside. Nowadays, more than 50 per cent of the European Union's budget is transferred as an income guarantee to one sector, namely agriculture. Farmers are losing support in the political arena for this immense income support contributed by the tax payers. Therefore, many attempts have been and will be made to reduce this percentage. Furthermore, paradoxically this money is often used in such a way that it exacerbates the problem. If farmers want to generate a higher level of income, they can only do so by raising the labour and capital intensity of their activities. By doing so, they intensify unemployment in the region. This is a circular process, which will undoubtedly not solve neither the social, nor the ecological problems of the European countryside.

Furthermore, there is the process of geographical polarisation leading to a certain pattern of competition in the use of land. We can explain this development using the example of the regions around Grenoble in France. Grenoble has always been the capital of the Dauphiné which now includes the Départements of The Drôme, Isère, and the Hautes Alpes. Grenoble was and is an important centre for that region. Recently, with the expansion of the High Speed Train System in France, the centre of Grenoble can be reached from central Paris in three hours and 10 minutes. Obviously, opportunities for the economic development of Grenoble increased dramatically. Additionally, it has the same type of connection with Lyon, and to the north to Chambéry, Annecy, and Geneva. Needless to say, in the greater Grenoble region the population density has substantially increased. But where do these people come from? They migrate from the remote areas of the country. Generally speaking, axes of transport and of communication result in a concentration of economic activities near these axes, but in particular, in the existing centres themselves. So far, modern communication systems such as e-mail, Internet and fax have not changed that pattern.

The people of Grenoble have profited from this development. They are able to increase labour and capital intensity of the economic activities taking place in these favourably located regions. Their income is higher than that of the, E U-supported farmers in the neighbourhood. Therefore, they are able to claim nature and space in the surroundings. For example, there is road project under construction to connect Grenoble by the A51 highway with the highway system of Sisteron in the South. This extend Grenoble's links to the Southern Mediterranean which puts them in a highly competitive position. Construction of this road through the Drac valley is

accompanied by a huge destruction of unspoiled mountain valleys. This polarised development of space in which the concentrations of population are connected with each other mainly by means of car transport without paying attention to the 'empty' space between, will shift the high burden of social costs to regions with a low density of population and economic activities as has been clearly demonstrated by the research of Brückl and Molt (1996).

Grenoble is located in the valley of the Isère surrounded by many beautiful mountains. For recreation, tourists can visit many of the well-known ski resorts such as Val d'Isère, Les Deux Alps, and Alp d' Huez. Additionally, people from the Grenoble region buy holiday houses in the surrounding mountains. The effects are varied. In some cases, these activities 'save' these small mountain villages by generating income from the spending of these people. In many other cases, high numbers of new apartments are built with all the detrimental effects on the social structure and nature of these areas.

The essential point is that a complete reconstruction of these regions is based on the impetus of market processes in a competitive market. So far, no social or environmental policy has been able to nullify these developments. Grenoble is not a special example; we see this type of development nearly everywhere in Europe. The crucial question is to what extent the sustainable tourism concept connected with the idea of rural development can change this situation.

5 Some Case Studies

The underdevelopment of remote agricultural regions in Europe due to falling employment in the agrarian sector are not easy to solve. The combination of the concept of sustainable tourism with traditional agriculture is often suggested as a solution. Some case studies can provide insight into how viable that concept is.

5.1 The Grande Traversata delle Alpi (GTA)

The valleys of the Italian Western Alps suffer particularly from stagnation in the agrarian sector. Some of these valleys had a quite developed industry in the past based on ores mined from the mountains. These ore mines attracted small scale-industries and provided work for the locals who no longer worked in the agrarian sector. Overtime, however, the quality of the ore decreased and the mines were closed (Grande Traversata delle Alpi, 1981). The employment situation deteriorated. The authorities of the Regions Piemonte and Lombardija initiated small-scale tourist

development for these regions: they created a long-distance footpath which started north of Ventimiglia in the south and ended south of the Matterhorn in the north (Grande Traversata delle Alpi, 1982).

The structure of this long distance footpath is based on existing paths and tracks which connected the villages in one valley with those in the adjacent one. The trail was marked by special signs, and booklets (in Italian) were written to facilitate the use of the mountain paths. No new mountain huts were built; existing buildings which were no longer in use were reconstructed as a type of mountain hut. Small restaurants and shops provided sufficient services for the mountain walkers. The idea was to generate income for the villages in the mountain valleys, giving an extra impetus to the local economy.

The trail is very attractive, as the alpine scenery is of high quality. It is not really difficult since the old tracks and mountain paths have been transformed. The total number of visitors, however, is quite low. Though one crosses the most scenic parts of the Italian Alps, walkers are, in most cases, alone on these trails. Mountain lovers from abroad were afraid that the trail would no longer be maintained due to the low number of visitors, so they publicised the path in various publications (Bätzing, 1986; Neubronner, 1992, Van der Straaten and Verhagen, 1996). A quite similar long-distance footpath, the GR 5, is located on the French side of the Western Alps. It is very popular and the number of visitors is many times higher than on the parallel Italian footpath.

What is there such a difference? Of course, the tradition of walking, particularly in the mountains, is different in Italy from that in France. Many foreign visitors however, walk on the GR 5, so this cannot be the only explanation. The most significant difference is that the French path is very well known and guidebooks in French, English and Dutch have been published and can be bought in every specialised bookshop in Europe. The initiative in France was taken by the French ramblers organisation which is perfectly equipped to publicise and support this type of tourism. The situation is completely different in Italy. In Italy, the authorities of the Piemonte and Lombardia regions took the initiative ; they are not equipped to promote this type of tourism. The result is that many walkers are not aware of the Italian path and, additionally, the quality of the huts is not always as it should be due to the neglect of local or regional authorities.

5.2 Bonneval in Maurienne¹

Bonneval is a small mountain village in the upper valley of the Maurienne, located at approximately 1800 metres. The total population of the village is 200 inhabitants. It is traditionally dependent on agriculture. When neighbouring villages such as Val d'Isère developed mass tourism after the Second World War, the municipality of the village decided not to follow that type of development. They did not want to lose their independence and were afraid that with that type of development, capital from outside the village would dictate the economic development of the village. That decision made them more dependent on other economic activities. There is a small-scale tourist infrastructure of 1,300 beds, whereas the hotel owners intend to sell traditional agricultural products to the tourists. Therefore, a combination of low-impact tourism and traditional agriculture is the basis for the village.

The municipality sold the right to generate hydro electric power from their own mountain river to the French utilities company, which generated a new source of income and facilitated the monetary position of the municipality. However, in 1990, the electricity company stopped paying for the power which weakened the monetary position of the municipality. The total infrastructure of the village could only be paid when enough tourists visited the village. In the period when the electricity company paid, there was a need for 1,300 tourist beds to balance the village's budget. This number of beds was available in the village. In the new situation the budget of the village could only be balanced if the number of beds would be expanded till 5,000. This development would, however, completely change the character of the village.

The village is in a difficult position. There are several options, such as cooperating with other nearby villages which have developed mass tourism. However, this type of development would compromise the original character of the village. Nevertheless, it is argued that without a broader base the village cannot survive. The total cost of the infrastructure cannot, in fact, be supported by this combination of low-impact tourism and traditional agriculture.

5.3 Parc Naturel Régional de Vercors (PNR Vercors)²

This concept is different from a national park, whose first aim is to protect landscape and nature. The aim of the PNR is to protect nature and to stimulate rural development. Of course, this leads

¹This section is mainly based on Meyer-Küng, 1992.

² This section is based on field studies carried out between 1993 and 1997.

to conflicts. Nevertheless, France has developed quite a number of these regional parks.

The Vercors is a limestone table land, south of Grenoble in the French Western Alps. The main elevation of the plateau is 1000 metres, while in the east there is a mountain ridge over 2,200 metres high. Traditionally, forestry and sheep grazing are the main economic activities. It goes without saying that these activities cannot guarantee a high level of employment. Tourism is the only option. Since the mountain scenery is of outstanding beauty, such a development is possible. Additionally, in winter the plateau is an excellent area for cross country skiing.

The model of the PNR offered new opportunities to develop small-scale tourism in combination with traditional agriculture. In fact, such a development can only be recognised to a certain extent. Sheep grazing on the Hauts Plateaux is supported by the PNR authorities; however, the influence on tourism is quite weak, mainly due to the remoteness of grazing locations.

The tourism concept in the region is different. Some places such as Villard-de-Lans and Lans-en-Vercors have chosen for a typical mass tourism option with huge apartments completely in conflict with any concept of landscape protection. Other places, such as Autrans, Meaudre, Vassieux, La Chapelle, and Gresse-en-Vercors gave priority to small-scale development based on summer walking and cross country skiing in winter. These places have been able to maintain their services such as schools, post offices, shops, etc. Landscape and nature protection in these villages have a much higher profile.

However, one cannot overlook the difficult position of many of these villages. Gresse-en-Vercors, for example, had 900 inhabitants in 1910. More than 100 farmers and their families had to live from the agricultural land around the village. Now there are 4 farmers in the village who have to make a living of the same surface. Since 1910 the number of inhabitants has dropped steadily to 185 ten years ago. The small-scale development in the village provided new jobs and the population is now up to 220. These villages are absolutely dependent on favourable developments in this type of tourism. Over 90 per cent of the tourists in the region are French from the Grenoble and Lyon region.

2.6 Conclusions

Some general conclusions can be drawn based on the discussion in the first sections and the previous case studies.

* The Italian case study demonstrated that, without effective marketing, the concept cannot be

successful. Marketing is often a weak point in small-scale tourism. Which segments of the market are the most appropriate and how can they be reached?

* The combination of traditional agriculture and low-impact tourism is not successful per se. Traditional agriculture provides more jobs, but makes the agricultural products more expensive. Only with well-developed marketing, are tourists willing to pay more for these products. The Bonneval example demonstrated that scale is always an important factor. Costs have to be paid by a large or a small number of tourists.

* Economic development on a macro level is one of the biggest problems in the discussion of rural development and traditional agriculture. General market transactions have compromised these regions. The products of intensive agriculture are only cheaper because this method of production is not confronted with all the social costs it generates, such as water pollution, the use of pesticides, the destruction of the landscape, air pollution, and the decrease in biodiversity. Generally speaking, these social costs become society's burden. It is not the polluter who pays, but the tax payer. Nor are the full costs of spatial polarisation paid by those segments of society who profit from the development. On the contrary, the regions suffering from that type of development have to pay the costs in this model.

* This brings us to the conclusion that particularly the European Common Agriculture Policy should be drastically changed. In the current model income support is given to farmers without heading the effects of modern agriculture on nature and the environment. The reform of the CAP should be used to create new procedures aiming to combine farmers support with the level of environmentally friendly agriculture.

* The French PNR concept has positive influences on the development of regions. Overdevelopment e.g. in certain parts of the Vercors should be prevented. On the other hand, we should not overlook the limitations of the concept: If all attractive areas in Europe are given this status, not all of them will have enough tourists. Many of these regions are too far away from the densely populated areas. Supply of attractive landscapes often does not meet the demand; this is especially true in spatial polarised development models which are currently the normal practice.

* All these developments are strongly related to policies. Market development is the cause of the problems described here. The market cannot, by definition, solve these problems. But how can a strong policy be developed in a climate where the market should function as freely as

possible. A strong policy is necessary to counteract the negative effect of the polarisation of the market on nature, the environment, and rural development. The concept of sustainable tourism can only increase the potential of regions which are more or less favourably located; the model cannot, however, solve the problems of other regions.

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